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“Nothing but Pleasant Memories of the Discipline of Slavery”: The Trickster and the  
Dynamics of Racial Representation

Emily Zobel Marshall

Anansi the spider and Brer Rabbit are anarchic trickster figures of African origin who dominate the folktales of the Americas. Anansi, whose origins can be traced back to the Akan of Ghana in West Africa, is predominantly found in Anglophone Caribbean folktales while Brer Rabbit, who originated from the hare trickster figure of the Bantu-speaking peoples of South, Central and East Africa, is popular across the French-speaking Caribbean and USA (Zobel Marshall; Werner). In the Francophone Caribbean and American states, in particular Louisiana, the African hare became known as ‘Compère Lapin’,<sup>i</sup> while in the English-speaking USA he became Brer (brother) Rabbit.

Brer Rabbit tales entered white American mainstream culture in the late nineteenth century through the Uncle Remus collections by American journalist Joel Chandler Harris. Harris, who collected the tales from black plantation workers, has been commended for keeping the folktales alive and accurately recording African American vernacular. However, he has also been heavily criticized for supporting slavery and contributing to the creation of patronizing and damaging stereotypes that romanticize the antebellum era. Uncle Remus, a character of Harris’ invention, is a kindly, satisfied elderly slave who, Harris writes in his introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880), has “nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery” and tells the Brer Rabbit stories for the entertainment of a little white boy (Harris in Chase xxvii). In a heated essay “Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine” (1981), Alice Walker blamed Harris of stealing part of her heritage and making her “feel ashamed of it” (Walker 31). Through Harris’ collections of Uncle Remus stories, the popularity of the rabbit trickster grew, particularly amongst white Americans. In 1926,

ethnomusicologist Helen Roberts proclaimed that Brer Rabbit had become a “byword of our own nurseries” and that while Brer Rabbit tales were known worldwide, “there has been no Harris for Anansi” (Roberts 244).

Through an examination of representations of Anansi in late-nineteenth-century collections in Jamaica and Brer Rabbit tales collected during the same period in the American South, this essay compares the very different trajectories of the two trickster figures. It examines how variances in cultural and political context have affected the interpretation of the tricksters and suggests that having “no Harris for Anansi” was key to the continued sense of ownership felt by African decedents in the Anglophone Caribbean for Anansi, in contrast to the problematic racial representations the American Brer Rabbit still provokes.

### **Anansi’s Journey: From the Oral to the Page**

In the late nineteenth century there was a surge of interest amongst white folklorists in the collection of black folktales, both in the Caribbean and the American South. In Jamaica, following the abolition of slavery in 1834, there was a sense of panic amongst folklorists – black folklore and folk culture must be preserved or it would die an untimely death. The main collectors of Jamaican Anansi stories during this period were white middle-class women such as Pamela Milne-Home (*Mama’s Black Nurse Stories*, 1890), an Englishwoman from a military family whose father was stationed in Jamaica; Ada Wilson Trowbridge (‘Customs and Folk-Stories of Jamaica’ in *Journal of American Folklore*, 1896), a scholar from a colonial family background; Pamela Coleman Smith (*Annancy Stories*, 1899), a bohemian artist brought to Jamaica by her father who worked for the ‘West India Improvement Company’ on the railways; and folklorist and author Una Jeffery-Smith or ‘Wona’ (*A Selection of Anancy Stories*, 1899). Their Euro-Christian values unavoidably influenced the content of the collections they chose to assemble; yet as contemporary

Jamaican folklorist Laura Tanna points out, they did make efforts to present their material in a “fair approximation” of Creole or “dialect English” (Tanna 22). In 1899 an article praising the work of Pamela Coleman Smith and Pamela Milne-Home appeared in *The Daily Gleaner* entitled “Our Anancy Stories.” The article claimed that the tradition of telling Anansi tales was dying out due to emancipation and modernization, and congratulated the two women for preserving the tradition in writing:

It is a pity that they have never been regularly collected and recorded, for the race of the old time house slave woman who held her audiences breathless with the wonderful doings of ‘Anancy’, his wife ‘Crooky’ and his son ‘Tacoma’ is almost passed away. (*The Daily Gleaner* n. p)

In 1900 another article entitled ‘Wona’s Anancy Stories’ was printed praising Una Jeffery-Smith’s Anansi collection and criticizing Pamela Coleman-Smith’s. The article claimed that Coleman-Smith’s illustrations were “not distinctively Jamaican” and she failed to capture “the Negro’s dialect” in her tales, but praised Jeffery-Smith for “adding to the folklore of Jamaica if even it is in so humble a way as in Nancy stories” (Zobel, 2012; *The Daily Gleaner* n. p).

Jeffery-Smith, in the preface to her 1899 collection, describes the tales as “quaint legends or traditions of the West Indian Peasantry, which their African forefathers brought with them from the mysterious ‘Dark Continent’” (Jeffery-Smith, Preface). In the Jamaican Anansi stories told by slaves on the plantations, African characters in the tales were replaced with myriad Jamaican mammals, reptiles and insects. These characters, represented as black, pit their wits against powerful white human figures, such as Massa (master) or Buckra,<sup>ii</sup> the King, Preacher and even Death. We see Anansi fully modified to his Jamaican environment: evading the whip, tricking Buckra, stealing Massa’s sheep or daughters, ambushing armies, killing the preacher, playing drums and working on his provision ground. In post-

emancipation tales he is eating callaloo, drinking in the rum-shop, avoiding hurricanes and duppies (ghosts), and going to Church<sup>iii</sup> (Zobel Marshall 49). And yet during the late nineteenth century, white readers across the Americas seemed to fail to recognize the ambiguities, veiled criticisms, double-meanings, allegories, metaphors, symbolism, jokes and allusions present in these slave trickster stories. It was only later, in the early twentieth century that anthropologists and collectors started to unravel their coded and defiant messages, although in 1892 Abigail Christiansen did note in her collection of trickster tales from the American South that the trickster represents the ‘coloured man’ and warned: “If we believe that the tales of our nurseries are as important factors in forming the characters of our children as the theological dogmas of maturer years, we of the New South cannot wish our children to pore long over these pages” (Christiansen in Levine 113). Englishman Walter Jekyll, who spent thirty-four years in Jamaica, also made a direct link between Anansi and ‘the Negro’ in his collection, first published in 1907. He commented that for both Anansi and the Negro, language was the “art of disguising thought” and “straightforwardness is a quality which the Negro absolutely lacks.” However, as well-known Jamaican scholar and artistic director Rex Nettleford responds, “Annancy admirers will probably reply that in order to cope with an unstraight and crooked world one needs unstraight and crooked paths” (Jekyll xii & 53).

By 1900 there were around forty English-language Jamaican Anansi stories in print in the UK and the Americas in journals, pamphlets and books. However, many of the late-nineteenth-century collectors complained that Jamaicans were often unwilling to share their stories due to a sense of shame and a fear of ridicule. Pamela Milne-Home writes that she was exasperated by ‘Negros’ who “fear ridicule” for telling Anansi tales and exclaim “dat foolishness; wonder Missis car to har dat” (Milne-Home 2). She also writes that “probably the same old woman will keep the children quiet with these tales, and the small white *buccra*

sitting by its nurse will have a flood of folk-lore wasted on its entertainment” (Milne-Home 2). Una Jeffery-Smith (*non de plume*, ‘Wona’) stated in her 1899 collection that “there has grown up among the Negroes themselves a strange, almost inexplicable feeling, somewhat akin to shame, which prevents their relating these stories, even in the privacy of their own huts, as they once did” (Jeffery-Smith 5). For Jeffery-Smith it was the perceived ugliness of Patois that was the greatest cause of embarrassment:

Now-a-days, the nurse is scarcely to be met with who, when asked to tell an Anancy story, will not promptly answer “don’t know none”; for the average Negro woman, like the average woman everywhere, dreads being laughed at. She knows that her dialect is not a beautiful one and that “Missus” won’t like to hear it from the lips of her darlings; so even if she does know one, she remains silent. (Jeffery-Smith Preface)

The supposed sense of shame felt by ‘nurse’ in using Patois or African American vernacular in front of whites may be a trickster posture in itself. We could speculate that ‘nurse’ may not have wanted to share her folktales with her mistress as they gestured towards some of the types of survival and resistance tactics implemented by black Jamaicans in the service to whites.

In his journey from West Africa to Jamaica with the Jamaican slaves Anansi underwent some significant changes that were clearly related to the new racialized dynamics. While he continued to be depicted as an anarchic rule-breaker who stopped at nothing to get his own way, Anansi’s interactions with the divine world of the gods was reduced in Jamaica. In the Ghanaian Asante Anansi tales, Anansi functioned as a tester of the boundaries of the Asante social and moral structures, injecting chaos into their highly ordered culture, and a mediator between the world of the divine and mankind – yet there is little mention of the gods in Jamaican Anansi tales (Zobel Marshall). However, Anansi stories did continue to

represent aspects of the African spiritual world on the plantations. Jamaican Anansi, like the Obeahman or woman, carries a bag full of wares that facilitate his power and the tales were often told at wakes or ‘nine-night’ ceremonies to entertain the spirit of the deceased (Milne-Home 1). There is also a belief in Jamaica that it is bad luck to tell Anansi tales in the daytime or “the spirits of the dead will come and take away the soul of the teller” (Herskovits 182). As a result, Anansi was perceived by some black and white Jamaicans as uncomfortably reminiscent of a ‘heathen’ African past and remained associated with ‘unchristian’ practices, yet this did not diminish the strong push amongst late-nineteenth-century collectors to preserve the tales in their original form and record them in Creole. While black storytellers were clearly reluctant to share their trickster tales with white collectors in both Jamaica and the American South, what is clearly absent from the Jamaican late-nineteenth-century collections I focused on is the desire and motivation to utilize the folktales as a way of legitimizing slavery—thus bolstering racist stereotypes and romanticizing the plantation past. This desire is precisely what we find at the heart of white collections in the American South.

### **Brer Rabbit and The Plantation Tradition**

The American South also experienced a surge of interest amongst whites in black folklore at the end of the nineteenth century. Following the abolition of slavery in 1865 and the Reconstruction era of 1865-1877, many southern whites still mourned the loss of the ‘good old-days’ of the plantation and this romanticizing was reflected in ‘plantation tradition’ literature and folktale collections. This was a literature full of nostalgia for a pre-civil war period which portrayed the south before emancipation as a peaceful and wealthy rural idyl. In this white plantation fantasy, slaves were happy being slaves and they understood their place in the world – they were fiercely loyal and pleased to serve their benevolent, chivalrous,

morally upstanding masters. Plantation tradition writers and folktale collectors believed that without guidance and protection from whites, blacks would lose their way – and for this guidance slaves were both grateful and indebted. For these whites the plantation community was a fully functioning ‘family’ that was horribly ruptured by the war and emancipation. The literary plantation tradition starts with Thomas Nelson Page’s collection *In Ole Virginia* (1887), a collection of dialect stories narrated by “a faithful ex-slave who reminisces nostalgically about ‘dem good ole times’” (Kaplan 244). It is important to note that Page also wrote the introduction to Pamela Colman Smith’s collection *Annancy Stories* (1899), which he praised as “the most original contribution to negro folk-lore literature since the day when ‘Uncle Remus’ gave us his imperishable record of ‘Brer Rabbit’” (qtd. in Smith 5). However, he immediately leaps to the conclusion that she *must* have been inspired to write them by Joel Chandler Harris: “These new stories are a contribution from the West Indian Negroes,” Page writes, and “they belong to the same class with the stories of ‘Brer Rabbit,’ which undoubtedly inspired the young authoress to collect them, as they have inspired all other writers of folk-stories, since Mr. Harris’s genius blazed the way” (qtd. in Smith 5). Page also claims that the stories are European in origin, from Aesop’s fables, *Arabian Nights* or “others which show marks of a less ancient fairy tale” (5). Page’s statements regarding the origins of the tales fall into a well-documented and heated debate over the roots of Brer Rabbit and other African American folktales that started in the late nineteenth century and reached its peak in the 1960s and 70s. A group of leading American folklorists claimed the stories originated in Europe while others set out to prove that they were of African origin. No such debate, however, took place in the Caribbean, where the Anansi tales were attributed to African origins by blacks and whites alike (Zobel Marshall).

Daniel J. Crowley’s *African Folktales in the New World* (1977) is a collection of essays from the 1970s which detail the forceful scholarly arguments between Richard M.



Dorson, who claimed that only ten percent of the hundreds of tales collected from African Americans were of African origin, and Alan Dundes and his colleagues, who spent a great deal of time and energy taking Dorson to task for his dubious claims (Crowley vii). In the foreword to the collection, Alan Dundes states that the critical method Dorson established (using Type and Motif indexes) for analyzing the folktales had its roots in Europe rather than Africa. Indeed, Dorson himself points out that “no adequate Type and Motif Indexes exist for Africa and for Black America,” which “Africanists” such as Crowley and Dundes argue renders his “basic reference sources so misleading as to be worse than useless” (ix). The argument that Brer Rabbit tales were of European, rather than African, origin has very serious consequences in terms of cementing the idea that African Americans could produce nothing new and merely replicated white cultural forms. Furthermore, it feeds into the damaging notion that African cultural forms did not survive in the Americas, thus discrediting centuries of rich African derived traditions, cultural forms and religious beliefs.

Harris published eight major collections of Uncle Remus tales; *Uncle Remus* (1880), *Nights With Uncle Remus* (1881), *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892), *Told By Uncle Remus* (1903), *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit* (1906), *Uncle Remus and The Little Boy* (1910), *Uncle Remus Returns* (1918) and the posthumous collection, *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus* (1948). He clearly made great efforts to couch his stories in plantation nostalgia to strengthen the stereotype and his fantasy of the contented slave. However, if we closely examine the trickster tales that he includes in his collection, unlike his portrayal of Uncle Remus and other happy-go-lucky characters on the plantation and ‘standard’ English narration that frame his stories, we find some of the original anarchic energy at the heart of the plantation Anansi tales. In the first story in his collection “Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy” (3) Remus, whom the little boy sometimes bribes with food to encourage him to tell a story, makes a direct link between the garden Brer Rabbit steals from to get food for his

dinner and the white boy's own mother's (Miss Sally's) garden: "Nex' day, Mr. Rabbit en Miss Rabbit got up soon, 'fo' day, en raided on a gyarden like Miss Sally's out dar, en got some cabbiges en some roas'n-years, en some sparer-grass, en dey fix up a smashin' dinner" (Harris in Chase 4). The story ends with Brer Rabbit outwitting his stronger rival Brer Fox and Remus telling the boy that Brer Rabbit will always triumph over his enemies: "Brer Rabbit gallop off home. En Brer Fox ain't never catch 'im yit, en w'at's mo', honey, he ain't gwine' ter'" (5). Harris' narrator Remus and his benign and kindly relationship with the little white boy are clearly a literary device aimed to defend the plantation system, yet the trickster tales told by Remus not only skillfully reproduce the African American vernacular on the page but also depict the many trickster tactics (lying, stealing, working slowly, pretending to be unwell, hiding, escape) implemented by slaves against their masters to survive, resist or escape the oppressions of plantation life.

The trickster tales told by Remus in Harris's collection, despite the violence being tempered (characters are rarely whipped or violently punished), provide a counter-narrative to Harris's plantation dream and in a sense 'write-back' to his deluded portrayal of plantation relationships epitomized by Uncle Remus and the little boy. Harris clearly states that he believed his tales were brought over with the slaves from Africa: "One thing is certain. The animal stories told by the Negroes in our Southern States and in Brazil were brought by them from Africa," yet he twisted the argument for the African origins of his stories to evade a devastating truth that lay at the heart of his collection (Harris in Chase xxiv). He mourned the loss of plantation culture, yet how could he account for the serious discrepancy between his 'happy darkie' storytellers and plantation characters, and the vengeful narratives of resistance encapsulated in his trickster tales? If slaves were satisfied with their lot, why did they tell stories about animals trying to outwit their masters, so clearly symbolized by the stronger animals in his collections such as Brer Fox and Brer Bear?

In a passionate and furious article entitled “Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit” (1949) Bernard Wolfe argues that Harris “heavily padded” the blow to whites delivered by the Brer Rabbit tales with the invention of his frame narrator Remus. Wolfe sees Harris’s Remus as part of a host of American stereotypes of the “giving negro” – a favorite stereotype of the American consumer goods market; Uncle Ben’s Rice, ‘happifyin’ Aunt Jemima pancakes and the “eternally grinning Negro” found in movie theatres, on billiards, food labels, soap operas and magazine advertising. The Uncle Remus figure with his “standard minstrel dialect” and “plantation shuffle” is the “prototype of the Negro grinner-giver,” according to Wolfe (527). Indeed, African American ‘dialect’ became so strongly tethered to the minstrel figure, epitomized by Uncle Remus, that Zora Neale Hurston was met with a barrage of criticism from the black intelligentsia for attempting to replicate it in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as seen in Richard Wright’s review of Hurston’s novel in *The New Masses* (October 1937).

Wolfe argues that Harris knew the subversive nature of the tales but shielded himself from it by *emphasizing* their African origins – if they were from ‘elsewhere’ he didn’t have to deal with the stories as reflections of the resistance tactics of African Americans in an oppressive regime. This view was supported by other nineteenth-century scholars, as Susan Millar Williams explains: “if the stories came from somewhere else [...] they could not be used as evidence that African American’s resented their oppression” (Williams xxx). Wolfe examines the tension between the romanticized vision of the plantation family kindled by the image of the benign Uncle Remus and the anarchic content of the trickster tales themselves. “Before Harris,” Wolfe writes, “few Southerners had ever faced squarely the aggressive symbolism of Brer Rabbit, *or the paradox of their delight in it*” (531 [my emphasis]). Yet Harris, by bringing both the white and black south into his trickster tales, ripped open “the racial myth” (531). Only a few questions began to be asked about the meaning of the trickster

tales following the popularity of Harris's tales: Wolfe notes that a few reviewers did ask if these "symbolic taunts and threats" were being directed against white America (532).

According to him, Harris hid behind two contradictory formulas: one, that he was merely a humble "complier" of the tales and two, that the tales came from Africa – therefore their seemingly subversive content was not a response to plantation conditions (532). Thus the argument for acknowledging the African origins of the trickster tales in America is complicated by the racial prejudices of white collectors.

In contrast to collectors in the segregated American South, late-nineteenth-century Jamaican folklorists did not appear to be responding to a need to legitimize slavery and segregation or gripped by nostalgic desire to return to the 'good old days' of the plantation period. In the American South, as the critic Shirley Moody-Turner explains, "the rhetoric of folklore achieved currency in the political and legal discourse of segregation because it was easily translated into support for the separation of the races and the inferior position of blacks" (41). Alongside the growing popularity of the plantation tradition came the growth of minstrelsy. The minstrel tradition was significant in the construction of ideas about blackness in the USA in the nineteenth century and shaped national consciousness, feeding into a discourse that highlighted perceived differences between black and whites. After the Civil War black minstrel performers were promoted as the "real thing" and shows stressed the "reality" of the act – "genuine plantation darkies" (Moody-Turner 35). They would play up to the audience's stereotypes and the image became 'yoked' to the 'folk' and folklore. As Moody-Turner explains, the minstrel stereotype became a "potent black folk image that intrigued the social scientist and provided ready support for the rapidly solidifying system of Jim Crow segregation" (Moody-Turner 38).

### **Harris, Jones Jr. and Fortier: The Paradox of the Collector's Delight**

The nostalgia for the pre-civil war era reflected in the trickster folktale collections of late-nineteenth-century American collectors Joel Chandler Harris, Charles Colcock Jones Jr. and Alcée Fontier can be explained by their roots in plantation-owning families or, as in Harris's case, living on an antebellum plantation, and the profound cultural, intellectual, ethical and economic rupture they experienced as a result of the Civil War. In 1862, Harris was sixteen years old when he left school to work on the southern newspaper *The Countryman* for Joseph Addison Turner on the Turnwold Plantation. It was there that Harris became interested in black folklore, spending his evenings in the slave quarters recording stories told to him by plantation workers. In later work, Harris wrote nostalgically of Putnam country, Georgia, and lamented the end of the 'old plantation' after the Civil War:

The memory of the old plantation will remain green and gracious forever. What days they were, those days on the old plantation! How vividly you remember the slightest incident! How picturesque the panorama that passes before your mind's eye!

The old plantation itself is gone...but the hand of time...has woven about it the sweet suggestions of poetry and romance, memorials that neither death nor decay can destroy. (Harris in Wiggins 269)

Charles Colcock Jones Jr. and Alcée Fontier were both of plantation stock and both determined to paint the plantation past in a favorable light. Jones was born in 1831 in Georgia and his family owned over a hundred slaves who cultivated rice and Sea Island cotton (Williams in Jones xiii). Jones's 1888 collection *Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast* was transcribed in the 1880s but it gives little information regarding the full names, lives and location of his informants. It is thought that he recorded the stories at his parent's plantations in Georgia and he clearly felt that slavery was beneficial for his "old plantation darkies" (Jones, Prefatory Note). He became an established historian, and he explains that was much indebted to Harris and aimed to bring the "Negro" folklore of Middle Georgia to the attention

of the public. Harris wrote to Jones in March 1883 because he was short of material and demand was high, which inspired Jones to start his collection (Williams in Jones, Prefatory note xxii-xxiii).

Jones states that his other key motivation was to ensure that the folklore of the swamp regions and Sea Islands of Georgia and Carolina didn't "lapse into oblivion" as the tales are now "seldom heard save during the gayer moods of the old plantation darkies" and they "materially differ from those narrated by the sable dwellers of the interior" (Prefatory Note vi). Indeed, due to the relative isolation of these regions and perhaps as a result of their proximity to the Caribbean, the tales in Jones's collection are closer to their Caribbean, and in turn African, counterparts. For example "Buh Rabbit An De Cunjur Man" (111-19) is a Gullah version of the Ghanaian Asante Anansi tale "How It Came About That the Sky-God's Stories Came to be Known as 'Spider-Stories'" (Rattray 52-58). In Jones' tale -- a tale later recorded in the former Gold Coast by folklorist R. S. Rattray in his 1930's collection of Akan-Asante Folktales -- Brer Rabbit is able to complete the seemingly impossible task of capturing a rattlesnake and a swarm of "Yaller Jacket" hornets, a task set for him by "Cunjur Man" in exchange for his "knowledge" (111). It is noteworthy that Onini the Python is replaced by a rattlesnake and Osebo the Leopard and Mmoatia the Fairy, which Anansi also has to catch in the original African version in exchange for Nyame's stories, are omitted in Jones' story. Furthermore, Nyame, the Asante deity, is replaced by "Cunjur Man" -- all clear indications that the stories were originally African and adapted by slaves to the Gullah environment and cultural context (Rattray 52-58). Indeed, as Williams explains, the Gullah region was considered one of "the deepest pockets of Africa in America, where the language was a mystifying mix of English and several West African tongues" (in Jones xxiii).

There are many parallels between Harris's motivations for collecting trickster tales and Jones's. The Jones family didn't have any moral objections to owning slaves and were,

like Harris, fantasists who believed that slaves, if treated in a way that they considered to be fair, were happy with the system of slavery and protected from the worst aspects of themselves. Dr. Charles Colcock Jones Sr. was a Presbyterian minister so preoccupied with saving slaves souls he became known as the “Apostle of the Blacks” (Williams in Jones xiii). He strongly believed that the bible sanctioned slavery – but that a good master had a duty to look after his slaves well. Before the Civil War, Jones Jr. was forced to sell some slaves from his family plantation, which “eroded some of the family’s most cherished principles, exposing the fact that slaves were not part of the family but were negotiable property” (Williams in Jones. xv). Jones then joined the Confederate army and was traumatized when Sherman’s army burned one of his family homes and most of his slaves, particularly the field hands, defected immediately (xvi). Jones spent several years trying to press for land claims for plantation owners who had been “dispossessed” and was clearly nostalgic for the “Old South” (xvii). It is noteworthy that the publication date of his collection in 1888 was also the date of the first issue of the *Journal of American Folk-lore* (xix). The journal responded to the late-nineteenth-century escalation in appetite for African American folktales and songs in vernacular amongst whites, appetites that were also satisfied by “local colour”writers such as Charles Waddell Chesnutt and George Washington Cable, with Uncle Remus as “the star of the show” (Williams in Jones xxi). As Williams explains: “Almost any dialect would do, but black dialects were especially popular. Feeding their appetite was a host of nameless hacks paid to fill newspaper column space with minstrel-show type jokes” (xxi). The tales collected by Harris and Jones clearly fed into this craze but they were also successful in their aims to preserve a folkloric tradition. However, it was clear that their nostalgia for a fantastical plantation past, coupled with their belief that the stories themselves evidenced their view that African Americans were morally and intellectually inferior human beings in need of guidance from whites, leaves the question of whether they did more damage than good an open one.

Born in 1856 Alcée Fortier, from Louisiana, collected Brer Rabbit stories on the Laura plantation. He became a language Professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, a founder member and president of the American Folklore Society, the organization that brought folklore into the mainstream public consciousness, and published *Louisiana Folktales: In French Dialect and English Translation* in 1895. His family were sugar cane planters of French Creole ancestry and prominent in state political and social life. Fortier claimed in his article in the second issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, entitled ‘Customs and Superstitions of Louisiana’ (1888), that slaves were: “As a rule, well treated by their masters, and in spite of slavery, they were contented and happy. Not having any responsibilities of life, they were less serious than present freemen and more inclined to take advantage of opportunities to amuse themselves” (Fortier 1888, 136). He went on to paint a romantic picture of New Year plantation celebrations, a scene “very different...from those described in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” for slaves were “certainly not unhappy on the plantations” (136). Furthermore, in the introduction to his collection he echoes Harris’s fantasy of the old black slave entertaining a little white boy with his tales: “It is a strange fact that the old negroes do not like to relate those tales with which they enchanted their little masters before the war” (Fortier, 1895 ix)

In terms of the origins of the stories, Fortier writes that animal tales in his collection are of African origin and sets out his derisive attitude towards African descendants in his opening paragraphs: “it is interesting to note what changes have been made in some well-known tales by a race rude and ignorant but not devoid of imagination and poetical feeling” (Fortier, Introduction ix). However, he does celebrate some aspects of the Creole spoken in Lower Louisiana: “[It is] not merely a corruption of French, that is to say, French badly spoken, it is a real idiom with a morphology and grammar of its own. It is curious to see how



the ignorant African slave transformed his master's language into a speech concise and simple, and at the same time soft and musical” (Fortier, Introduction x).

Fontier’s tales mirror several West African stories, such as “Compair Lapin’s Godchild” (33) which contains a similar structure to the Tar Baby story collected by Harris (Brer Rabbit dupes his enemy, after being stuck to a doll covered in tar, into returning him to his Briar Patch in place of a punishment), which in turn has similar themes to Rattray’s Asante tale “How It Came About that The Sky-God’s Stories Came to Be Known as ‘Spider-Stories’” (Brer Rabbit gets stuck to the fairy covered in sticky latex) (Rattray 55-59). Unlike Harris’s collection, where the trickster’s violence is played down, Fontier’s collection depicts ferocious plantation punishments meted out on the protagonists: Lapin whips his wife “until she loses consciousness” (41), and the character Brisetout (which translates as “wrecker”) is tied up. His enemies make a mixture of turpentine and red pepper in a tin pan and rub it on Brisetout until it burns and he “howled and bellowed,” a well-known slave punishment in the Americas (Fortier 47).

### **The Spider and the Hare: Diverging Cultural Trajectories**

During the same period that produced collections by Harris, Jones and Fortier, there emerged The Hampton Folklore Society (1893-1900), one of the first societies made up mainly of African American researchers and collectors. Donald Waters’ *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams: Afro-American Folklore from the Hampton Institute* published in 1983 was the first book to survey their contributions to folklore.

In December 1893 Alice Mabel Bacon, a teacher at the Hampton Institute and a white woman from a well-known religious family from New Haven, Virginia, announced in the Institute’s monthly publication that she was starting a society for the study of folklore which aimed to “collect and preserve all traditions and customs peculiar to Negroes” (Waters 1).

She also stated that the collection “cannot be done by white people” but “must be done by the intelligent and educated coloured people who are at work all through the South among the more ignorant of their own race” (Waters 1). She enlisted teachers and students for the job and formed the first folklore society made up primarily of African Americans. The group published their findings in a report every month under the column heading “Folklore and Ethnology” in the *Southern Workman* until the society broke up six years later after the departure of Alice Bacon to Japan.

Laurence Levine drew from the collection for his seminal text *Black Culture and Consciousness* (1977), while Richard Dorson and Alan Dundes also used the collection and printed sections of it (Waters 1-2). Despite the honorable intention to enlist African Americans to collect and analyze black folklore themselves, the society still had a central focus on racial uplift, the ‘scientific’ study of folklore and assimilationist policies. However, Shirley Moody-Turner argues that black contributors and collectors resisted these values and dedicated themselves to the preservation and celebration of black folklore and cultural traditions (Moody-Turner 45). Unfortunately, and predictably, despite being used by a few notable scholars such as Levine, Dorson and Dundes, the work of the Hampton Institute collectors did not receive the attention it deserved or provide the necessary counter-narrative to the Uncle Remus storyteller stereotype. Its influence was stunted by the claim made by some scholars (such as folklorist Wayland Hand, 1907-1986) that the collectors’ motivations were unknown and their collections disorganized, and therefore the collection should be treated with skepticism (Waters 2). It is noteworthy that the motivations of famous white collectors such as Harris, Jones and Fontier were not the subject of such scrutiny; the ethnic origin of Hampton collectors clearly influenced its reception and dissemination in the growing field of folklore studies. As Waters states: “In the era of Jim Crow at the end of the nineteenth century, blacks in the South became increasingly subject to serious political and

economic discrimination. Given such pressures, the wonder is not that an association composed mainly of blacks and devoted to an esoteric subject endured for such a short time, but that it existed at all” (Waters 2).

The Brer Rabbit tales in many ways became emblematic of nineteenth and twentieth-century racial prejudices and tensions in America, particularly in the Southern states, and the methods used to collect them and the ways in which they were framed and interpreted were shaped by the legacies of slavery and segregation. In Jamaica, however, the Anansi tales were, to a certain extent, integrated into Jamaican cultural life by the late nineteenth century and stayed relatively intact throughout the twentieth century, told and recorded in Creole by black Jamaicans. In 1960s post-independence Jamaica, which saw a new focus on celebrating the home-grown and instilling a sense of national pride in Jamaicans, Anansi became celebrated as one of Jamaica’s national heroes, the protagonist of a host of publications by black and white Jamaicans and a central figure in Jamaican cultural heritage and cultural exports (Zobel Marshall). The Brer Rabbit tales, in contrast, became tools through which racist images continued to be strengthened and disseminated in mainstream popular American culture, epitomized by Walt Disney’s 1948 animated version of Harris’ stories *Song of the South*, a highly problematic portrayal of plantation life, which caused decades of controversy and, as a result, was never released on to DVD.

The analysis of the differing trajectories of the two trickster figures is ripe for further and more lengthy analysis, which I am currently undertaking in the form of a monograph, as they clearly reflect key differences in the numbers and influence of new slaves brought over from Africa during the plantation period (Jamaican plantations relied much more heavily the importation of new slaves than the plantations of the American south) and the types of plantation and post-plantation societies that developed as a result. Twentieth-century US segregation policies and the ratio of blacks to whites in these two locations will also have

played a central role in the cultural interpretations of Brer Rabbit and Anansi. It is as a reaction to the damaging trajectory of Brer Rabbit's historical and cultural journey in the American South that twentieth-century African American writers – novelists such as Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, to name but a few – have purposefully sought to reclaim the Brer Rabbit trickster figure by incorporating him into their literary works.

In a rare tale collected by Harris and published posthumously in *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus* (1948), Anansi and Brer Rabbit meet one another. In “Brother Rabbit doesn’t go to see Aunt Nancy,” Uncle Remus tells us that all the animals, once a year, had to go to Aunt Nancy’s house and make their peace with her. “But who was Aunt Nancy?” the young white boy asks:

“It see like” the old man responded, “dat she was de granny er Mammy-Bammy-Big-Money – dat’s de way dey han’ it out ter me. Her rule went funder dan whar she live at, an’ when she went ter call de creeturs, all she hatter do wuz ter fling her head back an’ kinder suck in her bref an’ all de creeturs would have a little chill, an’ know dat she wuz a-callin’ un um. But ol’ Brer Rabbit, he got over havin’ de chill, an’ he say he wa’n’t gwine trapesin’ way off ter de fur country fer ter see no Aunt Nancy.”

(Harris in Chase 806)

The omnipotent Aunt Nancy is clearly an Obeah or Hoodoo practitioner; her house is like a “big chunk er fog,” she wears a long cloak and her “eyeballs sparkle red des like dey wuz afire” (807). She does a roll call and realises Brer Rabbit is missing and decides, if he won’t come to her, that she must go to him and shake hands with him at his house. As she gets up from where she is sitting her cloak falls off and to the animals’ amazement they “seed wid der own eyes dat she wuz half ‘oman an’ half spider” (808). She had seven arms and no hands and her house, they suddenly realized, was not “a chunk of fog,” but a huge web. They run away as fast as they can back to Brer Rabbit and tell him what they have seen. Brer

Rabbit “jump up an’ crack his heels tergedder, an’ holler ‘Ah-yi!’ an’ den he went on chawin’ his cud like nothin’ ain’t happen” (808). This is the last tale in Remus’s last Brer Rabbit collection and it describes an attempted meeting between the two most prevailing tricksters in the Americas. It is fitting that the only creature that holds more power than Brer Rabbit is Anansi, who, still bursting with her original West African energy, continues to harness the power of magic and the supernatural. The only creature brave enough to disobey her is, of course, Brer Rabbit.

The differences between the cultural trajectories of Jamaican Anansi and American Brer Rabbit in part lie in the motivations behind the collections white folklorists chose to assemble. Patriarchy also has a role to play; all the better-known late-nineteenth-century Jamaican collectors were women who collected the tales predominantly for personal and artistic, rather than professional, reasons, thereby creating very different collections to the American male collectors. More significant, however, is the fact that the American collectors examined here, who spent their youth on slave plantations (and who had been looked after as children by black nurses), clearly felt a greater sense of (misplaced) ownership over the stories and a longing for the plantation past.

So strong was this feeling that they decided to overlook the clear messages of resistance at the heart of the trickster stories they assembled, in which corrupt, stronger, dominant animals stand in for white oppressors. Harris does hint that the stories may be allegories: “It seems to me to be a certain extent allegorical, albeit such an interpretation may be unreasonable” (Harris in Chase xxv). He goes on to explain that it is “characteristic of the Negro” to select his hero as the weakest animal and “brings him out victorious in his contest with the bear, the wolf, and the fox” (xxv). In Jones’s collection we see clear evidence of the tales as comments on the unequal power dynamics of plantation life: ‘Buh Rabbit’ tricks the powerful but dim-witted ‘Buckra man’ (white master) into whipping ‘Buh Wolf’ for stealing

his sheep. In Jones's "De New Nigger an eh Mossa" the 'New Nigger' highlights the glaring horror of his enslavement; he must work all day in the cotton fields in the hot sun while his lazy master sits and watches: "New Nigger notus [notice] say eh Mossa [Master] heap we time duh seddown wid eh foot cross [sit down which his feet crossed], yent duh say nuttne an yent duh nuttne [not doing or saying anything], wen him haffer wuk all de time' in the cotton fields with his hoe when 'de sun hot" (Jones 130). However, Harris is quick to gloss his revelation that the tales may be allegories. In the trickster tales, he explains, "It is not virtue that triumphs, but *helplessness*; it is not malice, but *mischievousness*" [my emphasis] (xxv). Through the construction of his Uncle Remus 'type,' Harris reveals he hopes to preserve the "shrewd observations, the curious retorts, the homely thrust, the quaint comments, and the humorous philosophy of the race" – an admission of any malicious intent embedded in the tales would undermine the very illusion of racial harmony Harris sought to create through the publication of his collections (xxvi-xxvii). Self-delusion was so strongly at work for Jones, Harris and Fortier they continued to insist that slaves, despite the narratives of resistance encapsulated by their trickster tales, were helpless, simple, mischievous and lacking in virtue – and clearly in need of the guiding hand of the Southern slave owner.

So willingly blinkered were Harris and his peers by this fantasy that they consciously repressed the "paradox of their delight" (Wolfe 531) in the celebration of the trickster's art of manipulation, survival and revenge at the very heart of their collections.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The French *Compère* translates as "godfather" or "accomplice."

<sup>ii</sup> 'Buckra', also spelt 'Backra', meaning white master or boss, is derived from African Ibo word *mbakáre*, meaning "white man who governs" (Cassidy and Le Page 18).

<sup>iii</sup> Jeffery-Smith, 1899; Beckwith, 1924; Bennett, 1979; Jekyll, 1966.

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